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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES SCHOOL INTEGRATION WITH
MINISTER OF EDUCATION

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¶1. (SBU) On August 16, Ambassador Phillips paid a courtesy call on Minister of Education and Research Tonis Lukas. Minister Lukas emphasized that the GOE's program to introduce Estonian-language classes in Russian-language high schools is a step-by-step "transition," not a "reform." He reported that all 63 Russian-language schools are ready to start teaching Estonian literature in Estonian -- per the plan -- on September 3, the first day of school. (Reftel) Despite "outside efforts" to derail the process, Minister Lucas said the Ministry does not expect any problems, and certainly not Riga-style protests. (Note. In 2004, hundreds of ethnic Russians took to the streets in protest when the Government of Latvia implemented a similar, albeit more rapid-paced, school language program. End Note.) In an effort to avoid the problems faced in Riga, Lukas said, the GOE consulted the Latvian government about their experience. Minister Lucas commented that a number of Russia-based committees in Brussels are attempting to portray Estonia's school language program as discriminatory and a violation of human rights.

¶2. (SBU) Minister Lukas indicated other priorities for the Ministry include teaching Estonian to very young children and promoting vocational education. Currently, 3,500 elementary-age Russian-speaking children are enrolled in voluntary Estonian language immersion programs. In addition, teaching Estonian is obligatory in all Russian-language schools from kindergarten forward. Minister Lucas noted that fewer and fewer young people are interested in pursuing vocational education. As a result of Estonia's declining population (and a "baby bust" in the late 1990's), vocational school enrollment is low and the number of both Russian and Estonian-language high schools necessary to educate Estonia's population is decreasing. However, Minister Lucas emphasized, Russian-language schools will exist in Estonia as long as there is a need for them.

¶3. (SBU) Comment. Lukas' predecessor, Mailis Reps, was a member of the Center Party -- which is the most popular political party among Russian Estonians. Lukas, however, is a long-time member of the Isamaa and Respublic Union Party (IRL), traditionally the least favorite among Russian speakers. Despite the change in leadership, the Ministry's long-standing language integration plans remain relatively uncontroversial. End Comment.

PHILLIPS